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ABSTRACT

A series of focus-group interviews was conducted to explore the meaning of selected indicators of school climate to teachers and other school personnel. The selected indicators focused on encouragement and recognition of school personnel as aspects of school climate. School personnel were interviewed in groups of 5 or 6 in 27 schools with approximately 140 teachers, counselors, and media specialists. Participants were asked how they felt a school might meet or evidence the indicator of school climate in question. Results of a content analysis of responses were used in the subsequent development of a questionnaire and interview items that were consistent with the constructs of recognition and encouragement held by school personnel. Results may also be of interest to administrators and others who wish to give school personnel meaningful recognition and encouragement. Four appendixes list responses from the focus groups, and there is an 18-item list of references. (SLD)

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The Meaning of Selected Characteristics of Effective Schools to Teachers

Abstract

This paper contains a report on the results of a series of focus-group interviews conducted to explore the meaning of selected indicators of school climate to teachers and other school personnel. The selected indicators focused on "encouragement" and "recognition" of school personnel as aspects of school climate. Focus group participants were asked how they felt a school might meet or evidence the indicator of school climate in question. Results of content analyses of the groups' responses, along with methodological details of the conduct of the focus groups, are presented. The information gained through these focus groups was used by the authors in subsequent development of questionnaire and interview items which were consistent with the constructs of "recognition" and "encouragement" held by school personnel. The results may also be of interest to administrators and others who wish to give school personnel "recognition" and "encouragement' which is meaningful to them and which they value.

The Meaning of Selected Characteristics of Effective Schools to Teachers

Perspective

Research grounded in the "effective schools" paradigm has resulted in what Haertel, Katzenmeyer, and Haertel (1989, p. 17) refer to as a "loose consensus on the characteristics of effective schools." These characteristics are features of schools which cross subject area boundaries and which have been found to be associated with positive student outcomes, particularly achievement outcomes in mathematics and reading. One subset of the characteristics of effective schools is often referred to as "school climate." Although the effective schools perspective has been subjected to various criticisms (c.f., Cuban, 1983; Gottfredson, 1985; Haertel et al., 1989; Ralph and Fennessey, 1983), it has been widely advocated as the basis for certain aspects of school evaluation (c.f. Edmunds, 1979; NCA Commission on Schools, 1985; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Sagor, 1981; Wimpelberg, Teddlie, & Stringfield, 1989). Various survey instruments and batteries have been developed to assess students' and faculties' perceptions of school climate (c.f. California Department of Education, 1989; Maruyama, et al., 1989; Raudenbush, Rowan, & Kang, 1991).

"School climate" variables include a variety of factors, such as leadership of the principal, and the stability of the staff. The aspects of school climate of interest in this paper (hence referred to as "indicators of school climate") are:

1) Certified school personnel (i.e., teachers, counselors, and media specialists) report that they are encouraged to try new ideas and techniques intended to promote student achievement, high goals for and by students, and high expectations for and by students.
2) Certified school personnel report that they are respected as professionals, and their individual strengths are recognized.
3) Certified school personnel receive recognition that acknowledges their contributions to facilitation of student learning and development.

These three concepts cited above are supported in the literature as indicators of school climate, although the exact wording of the concept statement varies. Concerning the first, Purkey and Smith (1983) consider the autonomy of professionals in the schools in determining the exact means by which they will address school and student needs and problems as essential to the development of a school-specific culture. Based on review of the professional literature, Austin (1979) also concluded that teachers feeling free to choose techniques and try new things was

important to school effectiveness. Assessment of the degree to which school professionals feel encouraged to try new approaches or innovations is included in various assessment programs (c.f., Marayuma et al., 1989; California Department of Education, 1989).

Concerning the second and third indicators stated above, Purkey and Smith (1983) cite several studies which support the association of positive student outcomes with collegiality among teachers and administrators. They suggest that a collegial atmosphere exerts a positive influence in several ways. It breaks down barriers between department, and between teachers and administrators; encourages intellectual sharing and consensus, promotes a feeling of unity among the staff; and allows the staff to work together. Based on review of the professional literature, Austin (1979) and Lewis (1986) also concluded that mutual respect, collegial relations, and collaborative work among teachers were important to school effectiveness. Many authors advocate or include assessment of faculty perceptions of trust, security, and respect, and the degree to which staff are recognized for good work in school evaluations (c.f. California Department of Education, 1989; Maruyama et al., 1989; NCA Commission on Schools, 1985).

One of the criticisms most often leveled at the effective schools perspective is that the lists of characteristics used by different investigators are inconsistently defined (Cuban, 1983; Haertel, et al., 1989; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Ralph & Fennesey, 1983). A goal of this study was to clarify the meanings of the indicators cited above to school personnel.

Objectives

In the course of development of a comprehensive school evaluation system for state-wide use, the authors drew upon both the literature on the characteristics of effective schools, and the literature on the assessment of valued student outcomes (Center for Educational Research and Evaluation, 1989; 1990). As a part of the development of the comprehensive evaluation system, the meaning of selected indicators of school climate to teachers and other school personnel (i.e., counselors and media specialists) was explored. School personnel were asked, in focus-group interviews, how they felt a school might meet or evidence the indicator of school climate in question (Tesh, Penta, & Usher, 1990). The information gained through these interviews was useful in the selection and development of instruments to assess these indicators of school climate. It was central to subsequent development of questionnaire and interview items which were consistent with the constructs of "recognition" and "encouragement" held by school personnel. In this project (and in this paper) the term "teacher" in the effective schools literature was

interpreted broadly to include certified school counselors and media specialists.

Methods

School personnel (i.e., teachers, counselors and media specialists) were interviewed concerning the indicators of school climate in groups of five to six. Each of these focus groups was composed of: 1) at least one teacher with three or more years experience; 2) at least one teacher with less than three years of experience; 3) a counselor (if one was employed by the school) and 4) a media specialist (if one was employed by the school). Since the schools involved never had more than one counselor or media specialists, the remainder of each group was composed of teachers. Teachers were also selected to represent the different subject-areas taught and grade-levels served by the school. This group size was selected to obtain maximum participation by each respondent (Morgan, 1988).

Focus group interviews were conducted in a private room, and participants were told their individual responses would be held confidential. Group facilitators worked in pairs, with one facilitator asking the initial question, probing, and clarifying answers, and a second acting as recorder, and clarifying responses as needed. Personnel from the Center for Educational Research and Evaluation of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and professional employees of the state's department of education served as facilitators.

During the course of each focus group, respondents were informed that the selected indicators of school climate were under consideration for use in the comprehensive evaluation system being developed. Next, questions were asked concerning each of the selected indicators of school climate. Regarding the first indicator, respondents were asked "In what ways might certified school personnel be encouraged to try new ideas of this sort?" Regarding the second indicator, respondents were asked "In what ways might the fact that certified personnel are respected as professionals be demonstrated?" and "In what ways might the individual strengths of certified personnel be recognized?" Regarding the third indicator, respondents were asked "In what ways might certified personnel receive recognition that acknowledges their contribution to the facilitation of student learning and development?" Reflection, probing, and clarification were used to elicit answers from all participants in the focus group. The facilitators did not move on to a subsequent question until respondents indicated that all their ideas concerning the current question had been presented and recorded.

During the course of the focus group interviews, time and methodological considerations did not allow the facilitators to record comments such as "yes," "uh-huh," or "I agree," or to document nonverbal

indicators of agreement such as head-nodding. Probing by the facilitators resulted in documentation of any divergent opinions. Since general indications of agreement with prior comments were not recorded, it is not possible to estimate the proportion of respondents in each school who held a particular opinion. Elicitation of the exact number of respondents agreeing with each statement would have interrupted the flow of ideas in the focus groups, and would likely have been intimidating to participants. Group members expressed their opinions freely, and the data elicited represent the range of opinions held, if not the proportions of group members endorsing each idea. This treatment is typical of analysis of data collected through focus groups, where the group must be considered the unit of analysis (Morgan, 1988). In actuality, most group members indicated some degree of agreement with each statement.

During the course of the focus groups, participants frequently made comments about the data-collection activities or the indicators of school climate, such as "this is an important indicator," and "I'm glad you're asking teachers about this." Such comments have been eliminated from the lists of narrative comments treated in this paper. Comments regarding the particpants' schools (e.g., "this school is great") have also been eliminated.

Data Source

As stated above, data were gathered from small groups of school personnel. Focus group interviews were conducted in 27 schools (12 elementary, 7 middle, and 8 secondary schools) which were selected to be representative of the state's schools in terms of: 1) geographic location, 2) level of affluence, and 3) urban versus rural character. Approximately 140 school personnel (teachers, counselors, and media specialists) participated in the focus groups. Focus group interviews were conducted in the early spring of the school year.

Results

School personnel participated openly and eagerly in the focus groups. Several stated that they were delighted to be have the opportunity to address these questions. None expressed concerns about confidentiality.

The narrative responses to each question were reviewed, and common themes identified. Responses where then sorted into categories derived from these common themes. The categories, and the assignment of comments to categories, were done independently by two of the authors with a high degree of agreement. Readers may, of course, identify other themes; groups' verbatim comments are included in this paper to facilitate this.

In some cases, respondents' comments are difficult to interpret. This could be the result of error or incompleteness by the recorder, illegibility of handwriting of the recorder, or simply comments that are difficult to interpret in any context. The response categories for each question contain a category labeled "other" which includes miscellaneous and/or uninterpretable comments. In every case, this category is small, containing no more than three or four group responses.

The responses are presented in the appendices as recorded on the interview sheets because any interpretation on our part would require a degree of inference which might distort the original respondents' intended meanings. No attempt has been made on our part to correct grammar, spelling, or incomplete sentences. The only abbreviation interpreted was LBOE (for "local board of education"). Respondents at the school level were told that their individual responses would be held confidential, hence names of sites and personnel, and other identifying information have been eliminated from the narrative responses

Responses to the question: *"In what ways might certified school personnel be encouraged to try new ideas of this sort (i.e., ideas and techniques intended to promote student achievement, high goals for and by students, and high expectations for and by students)?"* could be sorted into seven categories. These categories were:

1) provision of materials and funds
2) provision of educational opportunities
3) release time to visit other schools or teachers
4) emotional support
5) professional interaction
6) information
7) other (miscellaneous)

Narrative responses, sorted into these seven categories, are presented in Appendix A of this paper. As can be seen from Appendix A, the provision of materials and funds, educational opportunities, and emotional support were the most frequently cited ways in which respondents felt they could be encouraged to try new ideas. Public recognition appears to be an important type of emotional support..The provision of release time to visit other schools, and opportunities for professional interaction with other teachers also appear to be important forms of encouragement. The provision of information was cited only rarely.

In response to the question: *"In what ways might the fact that certified personnel are respected as professionals be demonstrated?"* the groups suggested seven broad ways in which such respect might be demonstrated:

1) provision of materials and funds
2) provision of educational opportunities
3) emotional support
4) public recognition
5) professional duties
6) having opinions considered
7) other (miscellaneous)

Narrative responses, sorted into these categories, are contained in Appendix B of this paper. Public recognition and the provision of emotional support (which has a strong component of private recognition) were the most often cited means by which respondents felt that it could be demonstrated that they were respected as professionals. The types of private recognition (as emotional support) which were discussed were consistently recognition for individual accomplishments. The types of public recognition discussed included both individual recognition (e.g., teacher of the year) and group recognition (e.g., teacher appreciation day), however, individual recognition was mentioned much more often than generic group recognition. Assignment of professional, rather than clerical or mundane, duties, also appears to be an important way for respect for teachers as professionals to be demonstrated. Provision of educational opportunities, and having one's opinions considered, were mentioned infrequently by the groups.

Responses to the question: *"In what ways might the individual strengths of certified personnel be recognized?"* also fell into seven broad categories:

1) provision of materials and funds
2) provision of educational opportunities
3) professional duties
4) public recognition
5) private recognition
6) administrative involvement
7) other (miscellaneous)

Appendix C of this paper consists of narrative responses to this question, sorted into these categories. Public and private recognition were

the most often cited means by which individual strengths of personnel could be recognized. The category of private recognition included primarily individual recognition, while the category of public recognition included both individual and group recognition. The forms of private recognition cited were invariably intangible, verbal or written feedback. The forms of public recognition discussed included both intangible and tangible recognition (e.g., lapel pins). Also, the assignment of special professional duties appear to be an important way to recognize the strengths of individuals. Administrative involvement was occasionally mentioned as a way to recognize individual strengths, particularly when that involvement included assessing or discussing these strengths. Provision of educational opportunities was mentioned by only one group.

Groups' responses to the question:*"In what ways might certified personnel receive recognition that acknowledges their contribution to the facilitation of student learning and development?"* were sorted into five categories:

1) provision of materials and funds
2) public recognition
3) private recognition
4) professional duties
5) other (miscellaneous)

Narrative comments, sorted into these categories, appear in Appendix D of this paper. Public and private recognition were the most commonly cited ways in which contributions to the facilitation of student learning and development might be recognized. Public recognition, again, constituted a variety of recognition for individual and group contributions. Both tangible and intangible forms of recognition were cited, with tangible public recognition cited very frequently. The provision of materials and funds, specifically salary, also appears to be an important way in which contributions might be recognized. Assignment of professional duties was mentioned as a means of recognition by only one group.

Implications

The terms "recognition" and "encouragement" often connote verbal or written praise or encouragement. (In fact, these were the primary meanings initially ascribed by the researchers.) Analyses of the results of these data suggest, however, that school personnel regard tangible awards (such as note pads, pens, and food) as very important forms of recognition. School personnel value both public and private recognition. They value

both individual recognition (e.g., teacher of the year awards) and group recognition (e.g., teacher appreciation day).

Teachers, counselors, and media specialists view provision of opportunities for inservice education, release time to observe other programs, and professional interaction as important forms of "encouragement" to try new ideas. Emotional support by the administration is also important.

Assignment of professional duties is an important way in which school personnel feel that respect for them as professionals may be demonstrated. It is also an important way in which their individual strengths may be recognized.

The provision of materials and funds was frequently cited by participants in this study as a means to: encourage new ideas, demonstrate respect for personnel as professionals, recognize their contributions to students, and recognize their individual strengths. Provision of a professional-level salary was specifically cited as a way to demonstrate respect for personnel as professionals. Provision of equipment and resources was considered an important way to encourage new ideas.

The results of these focus group interviews have implications for the development of instruments to assess selected aspects of school climate. It is central to development of such questionnaire and interview items that the constructs of "recognition" and "encouragement" used be consistent with those held by school personnel. The results may also be of use to school administrators or others who wish to give school personnel "recognition" and "encouragement" that is meaningful to them and which they will value.

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APPENDIX A

Indicator of School Climate:

Certified school personnel (i.e., teachers, counselors, and media specialists) report that they are encouraged to try new ideas and techniques intended to promote student achievement, high goals for and by students, and high expectations for and by students.

Responses to the question: *"In what ways might certified school personnel be encouraged to try new ideas and techniques of that sort?"*, sorted by content theme.

Materials/funds

"Provision of examination materials; provision of materials; examine different texts, have displays of alternatives; provide demonstration of book/? computers"
"Teachers could be encouraged by providing funds for change"
"Grants to teacher for new ideas and innovative ideas"
"Encourage attending and using latest equipment and materials"
"Attitude of 'everything is possible' and money to support it"
"Professional encouragement - school pay for travel; monies available for supplies"
"Incentive awards"
"Flexibility of p. for use of building"
"Opportunities given, equipment, training"
"Incentive awards"
"Having resources available to give to staff"
"Grants, local money to try new things"

Educational Opportunities (workshops)

"Workshops"
"Staff development"
"Observe other teachers and/or other systems"
"Providing credits"
"Teachers are encouraged to attend workshops; have network for new ideas"
"Encourage attending and using latest workshops, classes"
"Encourage, allow field trips; allow resource people to come into school"
"Teacher be able to attend seminars and workshops"
"Provide the training for teachers"
"Support in obtaining needed support-such as financial"
"In-service with option to attend"

"In-service which teachers may attend"
"In-service"
"Opportunity to go over new techniques, go to meetings/conventions; learn from private sector/& other of the local board of education's regarding ideas"
"Workshops on new strategies for all teachers"
"Chance to attend profess. meetings to get new strategies; staff development opportunities"

Release Time (to visit other schools)
"Provide time to visit other schools and programs"
"Be able to visit other systems"
"Release time for teachers to meet with other teachers in other areas"
"Opportunities to see other programs"
"Release time for teachers to observe and visit other teachers"
"Consistent release time"

Emotional Support
"Freedom and support for implementing new things;'pat on back' for trying new things; support for training in new techniques; verbal support"
"Able to present new ideas and have it evaluated; have a feeling of acceptance of new ideas; being able to discuss with an administration"
"Verbal support and open attitude"
"Gives all folks a feeling of ownership"
"Openness and support by administrator to try (school climate)
"Sharing new research with staff (e.g., cooperative learning strategies); staff encouraged to share their ideas re innovative ideas with principal; 'ability to try' promoted by principal; specialized curricula (AP) for encouraging certain students"
"Administration supports; knows principal's position on excellence"
"Recognition (i.e., in newsletter to community)"
"Recognition of new ideas"
"Pointing out teachers who doing these things"
"teachers present new ideas and then are encouraged to try them"

Professional Interaction (observing other teachers)
"Teachers are encouraged to share ideas with faculty; encouraged to observe other classrooms; instructional and noninstructional personnel are allowed to make needed changes"
"Teachers can be encouraged by other teachers and by observations of other teachers"
"Observe other teachers and/or other systems"

"Observation; evaluation what is happening; suggestions for how it can be done more effectively; focus on proven activities"
"Close supervision (via observation) of new personnel and giving specific feedback"
"Sharing sessions"

Information (memos)
"Memos, brochures to staff on new research (resource-based teaching) and use in classes staff develop opportunities via newsletters and memos"
"Principal presents new ideas to be considered"

Other
"Release from class time for students"
"Principal need to be flexible; have an open attitude"
"Having an instructional administrator in school to model and help with innovation"
"Peer tutoring being developed"

APPENDIX B

Indicator of School Climate: Certified teaching and service personnel report that they are respected as professionals, and their individual strengths are recognized.

Responses to the question: *"In what ways might the fact that certified personnel are respected as professionals be demonstrated?"* sorted by content theme.

Materials/funds

"Teachers like being paid as professionals"
"Good salary schedule"
"Salary schedule"
"Outstanding teachers given additional instructional funds"
"Incentives given"
"PTA provide special assistance"

Educational Opportunities

"Conferences"

Emotional Support

"Plan books -- feedback written to teachers"
"Treated with respect, positive verbal comments at teachers' meetings, positive feedback"
"Administrators need to feed back to teachers when the job is well done"
"Written/verbal positive feedback, needs addressed"
"Set up planned discussion times with teachers, in administrator's office"
"Pat on the back or committees"
"Annual evaluation - Principal could emphasize the positive aspects of this"
"Individual notes, poems, etc"

Public Recognition

"Teacher of the year from each school; Chamber of Commerce have reception for teachers at the beginning of each year"
"Teacher appreciation day"
"PTO sponsor teacher appreciation"
"Teacher of the year; teacher of the month; teacher appreciation day"
"School system recognizes teachers performing outstanding performances"
"Teacher of the year selection at each school and compete on regional basis; they are recognized at Board meetings"
"Media coverage of outstanding teachers"
"Local newspaper recognition"

Professional Duties

"Task assignments to them - trivial/mundane"

"Task assignments, i.e., use of professionals for clerical works and mundane tasks"

"When selected to work on certain projects"

"Selection for committee work. This is tough to document."

Opinions Considered

"Opinions regarded or disregarded in meetings regarding students"

"Input being used"

Other

"Business demonstrate by adopt a school program"

No ideas from group (silence)"

APPENDIX C

Indicator of School Climate: Certified teaching and service personnel report that they are respected as professionals, and their individual strengths are recognized.

Responses to the question: *"In what ways might the individual strengths of certified personnel be recognized?"* sorted by content theme.

Materials/funds
"Provide materials/ways to improve areas of weakness"
"Teacher of Year and Teacher of Quarter voted on by students to get money"

Educational Opportinities
"Allowed time/opportunities to travel for professional development"

Professional Duties
"Give you opportunity assignments to your area of strength/interests"
"Assignments to chair person, assignments to tasks one is good at"
"Media specialist is given responsibility for operating media"
"Team leadership, committee chairmanship in area of expertise"
"Appointment to committees"
"Programs provided by people with strengths"
"Assigning students to teachers with special strengths"

Public Recognition
"Teacher appreciation week -- sign; named package for each teacher with buttons to wear, apple lapel pin, letter, or inspirational message; free lunch by administration, "Payday" candy bar with check"
"Bulletin board, notes on board in school office, morning announcements for coaches"
"Teacher of Year and Teacher of Quarter"
"Teacher of the Month"
"Star Teacher, Teacher of the Year"
"School pride recognizing teachers for accomplishments"
"Public recognition"
"Morning announcements recognize staff"
"Teacher Appreciation banquet"

Private Recognition
"Formal & informally comments from administrators"
"Principals letters of commendation"
"Informal feedback on in-class activities"

"Evaluations are focused on positive recognition"
"Principal acknowledge verbally that you are good in area"
"Informal: "You are doing a good job"
"Through personal relationships"
"Strengths noted on the annual evaluation"

Administrative Involvement
"Principal gets "in the trenches"
"Principal ask teachers about their areas of interests/strengths"
"Listen to help implement ideas"

Others
"Get parents into schools during the day"
"Things to boost morale- principal sets tone"

APPENDIX D

Indicator of School Climate: Certified school personnel receive recognition that acknowledges their contributions to facilitation of student learning and development.

Responses to the question: *"In what ways might certified personnel receive recognition that acknowledges their contributions to the facilitation of student learning and development?* by content theme.

Materials/funds

"Need an attractive professional salary schedule"
"Salary supplemented by local effort, money increase for veteran teachers need money to draw good people"
"Foundation grants"
"Money"
"Money"
"Rewards might be something that would help them further in their classroom"

Public Recognition

"Recognition of staff i.e. encouraged by giving T-shirts; Categories of recognition: Newspaper Journal Award, National Teacher of Scio, local Teacher of the Year announced to entire school; articles for paper, monthly school newsletter to parents"
"Service personnel awards, give teachers awards"
"Teacher of the year/month, Career ladder, notes, breakfast, flowers, verbal"
"School system sponsors teacher luncheon, give teachers awards"
"Teacher of the year and dinner"
"PTA--provides refreshments of week"
"Board meeting recognition, Teacher of the year, Chalk Talk recognition, Apple Day"
"Pictures in newspaper with students, announce over intercom about teachers accomplishments"
"Teacher of the year, may teacher of the month or week"
"Teacher of month/week"
"Teacher of the month"
"Teacher appreciation week, teacher of the year"
"Teacher appreciation week activities, counselor's appreciate week activities"
"Teacher of the year,newspaper articles
"Teacher of the quarter--selected by club presidents, teacher of the year, honors program"
"Recognition by community (rotary, PTA, teachers)"

"Recognition from the community"

Private Recognition

"Personal notes"
"Annual evaluation--written comments,
"Evaluation system can give recognition to good teachers, written comments"
"Acknowledgement and recognition that you did well"
"Principal's recommendation"
"Administrator gives special compliments"
"Certificate saying "good job," notes from principal/personal comment from plan book, positive verbal feedback from principal, Superintendent verbal feedback"
"Need pat on back, acknowledge and recognize"
"Positive verbal feedback from Principal and parents"
"Informal--Principal's comments"

Professional Duties

"Opportunity to lead projects"

Other

"One of the leading factors that make people leave the profession, teachers and staff are being neglected, simple things"
"Media specialists work with principals and teachers to recognize students"
"Encouraged to apply and given support to try"